

## SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

**Question:** Are priests who abuse children different from other child molesters?

**Background:** Considerable media attention has focused on sexual abuse committed by Catholic priests and members of religious orders. Although the number of abusive priests is small (approximately 4% of all priests), sexual abuse by religious leaders represents a particularly serious betrayal of trust.

Historically, the Church has typically addressed abuse as an internal matter. Abusive priests received sanctions and treatment from specialized Catholic service agencies, with relatively few of the offending priests becoming involved in the criminal justice system. In recent years, the Catholic church has implemented policies promoting disclosure of cases of abuse, and sexual offenders among the clergy have increasingly been directed toward external agencies. Consequently, it is important to know the extent to which the standard methods for dealing with sex offenders are likely to be effective with sexually abusive priests and members of religious orders.

**Method:** A conference was held at the Vatican in April, 2003, involving experts in the assessment and treatment of sexual offenders along with senior members of the church administration. The external experts were asked to summarize current scientific knowledge concerning sexual offenders, and to respond to questions originating from practical decisions faced by the church (e.g., how can potential child molesters be prevented from being priests? How effective is treatment for known offenders?). The formal presentations and summaries of the discussion were translated into English and published by the Vatican.

**Answer:** Sexually abusive priests share many features with other child molesters, but differences were also noted. As with other child molesters, deviant sexual interests and alcohol abuse are common among abusive priests. In contrast to other child molesters, priest abusers are typically older, better educated, and less antisocial (although still more antisocial than other priests). Whereas the victims of child molesters are typically girls, priests typically abuse adolescent boys.

The limited available research suggests that the factors that predict recidivism among abusive priests are similar to the factors found among other sexual offenders, e.g., narcissistic and antisocial traits, deviant sexual interests, prior sexual offences. The sexual recidivism rates of abusive priests (approximately 5% after 10 years) appears somewhat lower than the rates observed for other child molesters (15% - 25% after 10 years).

#### Policy Implications:

1. The substantial similarity between abusive priests and other child molesters suggests that the management of abusive priests can benefit from what is already known about child molesters in the general population.
2. The screening of candidates for the priesthood should consider the risk markers for child molestation in the

general population: negative family background, emotional identification with children, weak adult relationships, deviant sexual interests and attitudes tolerant of adult-child sex.

3. The treatment programs currently offered to abusive priests should be reviewed to determine whether they meet contemporary standards for sexual offender treatment.
4. Evaluators conducting risk assessments with abusive priests should consider the risk factors already established for predicting recidivism among other types of child molesters.

**Source:** Hanson, R.K., Pfäfflin, F., & Lütz, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Sexual abuse in the Catholic Church: Scientific and legal perspectives*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

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